

Blyth, 1849, an extralimital species that winters in eastern Nepal, terai and Kathmandu valley, Bengal, south to Kolkata (Calcutta), Bangladesh and N.E. India (Ali and Ripley 1987). The race *indicus* differs from *korejewi* in being darker olive-brown; less grey above and below; having a distinct brownish wash on upper breast (vs. clear grey); more white on throat (vs. white largely lacking); and the brown eye-stripe more prominent behind eye (Ali and Ripley 1987). Recently, Punjabi (1997) sighted the species (race?) from Mumbai citing it as the southernmost record in India. Kazmierczak (2000) points to stray records in southern India. However, on our enquiry to provide details of these sightings, he replied that these records are probably erroneous (*in litt.*).

Sriharikota (Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh) is a spindle shaped island (181 km²), bordered by the waters of Pulicat Lake (c.461km²) on its western, northern and southern borders and by the Bay of Bengal on the east. The Island is accessible by road from the mainland from Sullurpet, 18km to the west of its central portion. Sriharikota is a "restricted area" due to its status as a satellite-launching base of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). Due to its special status, Sriharikota has now the largest and best protected of the few remaining patches of Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest in India. The wetlands of the Island comprise of fresh and brackish water streams and lakes, and some abandoned and almost silted village ponds.

On 28th May 2003 at 07:00 hours, we sighted a Water Rail along one of the streams in Sriharikota. The Water Rail has not been recorded by earlier workers in Sriharikota (BNHS 1976, Samant & Rao 1996, Rao 1998) nor during the first year of our on-going 3-year project on the faunal diversity of the Island. The species is easily separated from most other rails and crakes by its long red bill, and, is further distinguished from the Blue-breasted Rail *Gallirallus striatus*, which also has a (less) relatively long reddish bill, by the latter's barred upperparts (vs. brown blotches running backwards). However, being unfamiliar with the species, we

failed to look for the presence of a brownish wash on the upper breast (present in race *korejewi*), helpful in the separation of the races. However, we presume it to be *indicus* as the brownish wash was not noted in both our jottings.

The sighting of the Water Rail in Sriharikota is interesting, as besides adding to the scanty records in southern India, the sighting was towards the end of May, an out-of-season sighting. Due to its skulking nature the species is easily missed and birders should keep a lookout for it with extra efforts to identify the race, as Ali & Ripley (1987) comments, 'owing to paucity of specimens and dependable records, status for the two races in our area remains uncertain'.²

References

- Ali, S. and S. D. Ripley, 1987. *Compact Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- B.N.H.S., 1976. Birds of Sriharikota Island. A preliminary survey by the BNHS submitted to ISRO. Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai.
- Kazmierczak, K., 2000. *A Field guide to the birds of India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and the Maldives*. New Delhi: OM Book Service.
- Punjabi, H., 1997. Sighting of Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* near Mumbai. *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.* 94:156.
- Rao, P., 1998. The bird communities of the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forests of Sriharikota. Ph.D. Thesis. University of Bombay.
- Samant, J. S. and P. Rao, 1996. An ecological investigation of the avian community of Sriharikota Island. Final Technical Report. Bombay Natural History Society, Bombay.

² **Editors' Note:** This observation of the authors extends the range of the Water Rail so much that it warrants caution. It has been published not so much to imply acceptance as to alert birdwatchers to look out for the species in particular and to pay more attention to the family Rallidae.

A meeting of the Goose Specialist Group

Prakash Gole

1/B Abhimanshree Housing Society, Off Pashan Road, Pune 411008

The Goose Specialist Group of Wetlands International meets annually in one of the countries of Europe to discuss conservation and management of various goose species. The 2004 meeting took place in Odessa, Ukraine, in early March. Scientists from the University of Odessa organized it. Specialists from Finland, Sweden, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, France and Spain were present in strength, together with some from Hungary, Estonia and Kazakhstan.

I attended the meeting on invitation as the coordinator for Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus* (Latham, 1790).

The meeting mainly discussed the problems of geese wintering in various nations of Europe. A number of goose species from Pink-footed *Anser brachyrhynchus* Baillon, 1834, Greylag *Anser anser* (Linnaeus, 1758) and Greater White-fronted *Anser albifrons* (Scopoli, 1769) to Lesser White-fronted *Anser erythropus* (Linnaeus, 1758), Bean *Anser fabalis* (Latham, 1787), Barnacle *Branta leucopsis* (Bechstein, 1803), Brent *Branta bernicla* (Linnaeus, 1758),

and Red-breasted *Branta ruficollis* (Pallas, 1769) and breed from Iceland to east Siberia in the Tundra region and winter from U.K. to Japan and south to India and Africa. On migration and in winter quarters the main threats they face are hunting and habitat loss including fragmentation. In some countries hunting pressure was staggering. Over 50,000 Greater white-fronted geese used to be shot in the Netherlands every year. Now hunting restrictions are in force in many countries. This has resulted in a great increase in the numbers of this goose whose world population now exceeds seven million!

Incidentally delegates asked me if the numbers of Barheads are increasing since the ban on hunting in India, our country being the major wintering areas of this goose. Their number obviously does not show any increase. But it is also true that their number is not regularly monitored in our country. On the other hand *A. indicus* has become somewhat of a problem in Europe. It has escaped from private collections and has been breeding in Sweden and some other countries as a feral species. They want to get rid of it, as it is not a true European goose!

The Lesser white-fronted, with a total world population of less than 25,000 is now considered endangered. It breeds in tundra from Norway to Eastern Siberia and winters mainly in Azerbaijan and north China. It no longer breeds in Sweden and Finland. A programme of re-introduction was therefore carried out in Sweden using captive-bred chicks in association with Barnacle geese as foster parents. Interestingly chicks became imprinted on the release site and not on foster parents. After migrating with foster parents to Netherlands in winter, they returned to the release site without any guidance from the foster parents. This programme has now been stopped as gene contamination with Greater white-fronted was observed in the released birds!

Recently habitat loss, mainly conversion of wetlands and meadows to agriculture, became a major threat in Belgium and Hungary; illegal fishing and oil pollution in wetlands in Bulgaria; hunting, eco-tourism and a shipping canal proposed through the Danube Delta National Park in Ukraine and hunting pressure in almost all countries are the other threats encountered by geese today in Europe.

Ukraine, together with Rumania and Bulgaria, are major wintering areas for Greater white-fronted and Red-breasted geese. The latter is another endangered goose species. We saw huge flocks of both occurring close to each other though they rarely inter-mix. Greater white-fronted outnumber Red-breasted by a proportion of 10:1. In one large saucer-shaped basin, dominated by agricultural fallows, we saw a 20,000 strong flock of Greater white-fronted. Next to them was a flock of about 2,000 Red-breasted. Impressive gatherings of Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* (Gmelin, 1789), Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* (Linnaeus, 1758) and Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* Linnaeus, 1758, were also seen in wetlands of Ukraine. These wetlands support extensive reed beds of *Phragmites* sp., harvested and exported to the Netherlands.

In India we are familiar with Greylag which breeds from U.K. and Spain in the west to Ukraine in the east. It also winters in Africa and China besides India. In Donana National Park in Spain they are threatened by lead and cadmium leaching from a nearby mine. In Ukraine, in one of their breeding areas in Danube Delta National Park, their principal food item was found to be bulbs of *Trapa natans*, a common wetland plant in India. Another common Indian plant *Xanthium strumarium* was also found to be growing in the Danube delta.

I presented to the meeting whatever data I could collect about the world status of Bar-headed goose. Its major breeding areas lie in Tibet where in the nineties of the last century, over 10,000 pairs were said to be breeding (Jian jian Lu, pers. comm.). We have small breeding colonies of this goose in Ladakh, the largest one with over 50 breeding pairs was the one I discovered south of Tso Moriri in 1980. To my knowledge this colony has not been investigated since then. The goose no longer breeds in Russia and the breeding population in Mongolia has declined from over 1,000 pairs to just a few. In 1997 I visited Kyrgyz Stan where only 10 nests were found on an island in Song Kul, a lake at an altitude of 3,000m. Breeding numbers of this goose seem to have declined over most of its range, except in Tibet.

Data about its wintering numbers come from winter waterfowl counts carried out in India, Pakistan, Nepal, China, etc. In Pakistan wintering numbers seem to have declined drastically. In India they are more or less stable with increase in some areas and decline in others. In Nepal this goose appears mainly on passage. In 2000 I visited Myanmar to assess the numbers wintering in that country and found that over 4,000 geese winter on the banks of the Irrawaddy. Counts in 2001-2003 by Joost van der Ven of Netherlands showed more or less identical numbers. I estimated the total world population of Bar-headed to be of the order of between 30,000 to 35,000 birds.

However, compared to the data amassed by European nations about the breeding, wintering and migration of geese over Europe, we in Asia, seem to know little about the goose situation in the Asian continent. In India goose research and monitoring seems to have not been taken in any seriousness. I have met goose researchers from Japan and China but such meetings are sporadic and exchange of information extremely scant. It is usually difficult to establish contacts in countries like Mongolia and Kazakhstan, though the specialists from the latter country told me that they regularly ring Bar-headed and that most of the recoveries come from Tibet. In our country a satellite transmitter was placed on a Bar-headed wintering in Bharatpur's Keoladeo Ghana National Park. The goose migrated to its breeding area in south Tibet after staging on the Ganga and then flying directly to south Tibet. Ringing as a planned activity has almost ceased in India seriously hampering acquisition of migration data.

It is necessary for people interested in observing geese to come together, pool their energies and resources to form

a database, establish regular contacts and improve our knowledge of this interesting group of birds. Is it too early

to visualize a Goose Specialist Group of Asia?

Blue-bearded Bee-eater and other birds in Kaigal, Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh

V.Santharam

Institute of Bird Studies & Natural History, Rishi Valley Education Centre, Rishi Valley P.O. 517 352, Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh. Email: birds@rishivalley.org

We went camping to Kaigal, with students of Rishi Valley School. This riparian forest area is owned by Krishnamurti Foundation India and is located on the Palamner-Kuppam road. The trip was short and lasted just over 27 hours on 18th-19th January, 2004. The habitat is mainly riparian with dry deciduous forests (reduced to scrub or grassy stretches on the fringes) and cultivation. During our visit there was hardly any water flowing in the stream and the only water in the vicinity was in the few deep pools.

With a group of 27 highly energetic students one rarely gets a chance to watch birds and I did not anticipate much on this trip. Yet I was able to record over 40 bird species here. One of the interesting birds seen was the Blue-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctyornis athertoni* (Jardine & Selby, 1828). A single bird was seen in the riparian habitat on the morning of 19th January. This species was earlier recorded in the Rishi Valley campus in 2000-2001 (Santharam 2001) and it was exciting seeing it here.

Another interesting bird identified from the calls was the Red Spurfowl *Galloperdix spadicea* (Gmelin, 1789). At least 2-3 birds were heard calling from the forest sloping to the stream early that morning. There are reports of this bird from scrub / deciduous forests around

Madanapalle (Chittoor district) as also reports of it being hunted / captured for the pot. The other interesting birds seen were Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii* Temminck, 1813, White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus* (Scopoli, 1786), Spotted Babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps* Swainson, 1832, Black-naped Monarch-flycatcher *Hypothymis azurea* (Boddaert, 1783), and White-spotted Fantail Flycatcher *Rhipidura albicollis albogularis* (Lesson, 1831).

This forest tract lies adjacent to the Kaundinya Wildlife Sanctuary, which has a small population of Asian Elephants *Elephas maximus* Linnaeus, 1758, which seasonally migrate from Tamil Nadu. There are old records of the White-bellied Treepie *Dendrocitta leucogastra* Gould, 1833, from these forests (Ali and Ripley 1983). Perhaps a detailed survey of these forests could tell us the present status of these birds and other interesting birds that are patchily distributed outside the Western Ghats.

References

- ALI, Salim and S. Dillon Ripley. 1983. *Handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan together with those of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka*. Compact edition. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
 Santharam, V. 2001. Blue-bearded Bee-eater in Rishi Valley. *Pitta* 118 (February): 1.

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* (Gmelin, 1789) feeding on insect road kills

S. Sivakumar

Bombay Natural History Society, Hornbill House, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai 400023

On the evening of 8th September 2003 (around 16:00 hours), the weather was humid at Sriharikota Island (Andhra Pradesh). Passing patchy dark clouds gave shade intermittently. Thousands of dragonflies were flying low over the road that connects Sriharikota Island with the mainland (Sulurpet), by passing through the Pulicat Lake. Vehicular traffic is high at this hour. This caused a heavy casualty among the dragonflies. A pair of Gull-billed Terns *Gelochelidon nilotica* (Gmelin, 1789) utilized this

opportunity for effective feeding with minimum effort. They flew slowly over the road and made swooping dives to pick up the dead dragonflies from the road.

The Gull-billed Tern is one among the five species of terns reported from Sriharikota Island and the adjoining Pulicat Lake (Rao 1998). In India, the bird breeds in northwestern parts and is distributed widely throughout the country during winter (Ali and Ripley 1987). The Gull-billed Tern is an opportunistic feeder, more insectivorous